Developing Fluency Using Decodable Texts

Decodable texts include two types of words: regular (decodable) and irregular or words the student has not been taught the pattern for yet. The majority of the words should reflect the patterns that the student has been taught with a much smaller group of high frequency or irregular words that are necessary for the flow of the text (e.g., words such as of, is, there, they, etc.). This type of text is important as it provides students with the practice required for mastery of the pattern/s studied. For many students, decodable text is necessary because they require a great deal of practice before mastery is established. The goal of teaching students to decode is for them to learn to recognize the patterns of English automatically. Thus, ultimately, the student will not have to decode words but will recognize them automatically based on the patterns of the six syllable types in English and the letter sound associations these patterns contain.

For students to become automatic in reading words with regular patterns, the material they practice must be appropriate. The first criteria is that all of the patterns in the decodable words must have been directly taught prior to reading practice. In addition, the irregular or high frequency words must also be taught using a different strategy since these words cannot be sounded out. Asking students to read passages containing patterns that they have not been adequately taught is counter productive and only encourages guessing.

These strategies and steps can be used to develop mastery in reading decodable words using appropriate decodable texts:

1. **Practice the patterns that will be in the story at the word level**. Remind the student of the pattern or patterns that are in the story and practice reading words with this pattern. Word lists or words on cards can be used at this step. Some students enjoy timing their word reading and graphing their improvement. If the student is having difficulty with certain patterns or letter-sounds, highlight these problem areas in the words and have the student give the correct sound for the highlighted part first and then read the word. An excellent resource for this level of practice is found in the Reading Speed Drills by Oxton House Publishers ([www.oxtonhouse.com](http://www.oxtonhouse.com)).

If the student continues to sound out words sound by sound, try these strategies:

(a) Teach the student to read in chunks. The most efficient chunks are the word onset and the rime. The onset is the beginning consonant/s and the rime is the vowel and ending consonant/s. For example, in the word ‘black’, the onset is /bl/ and the rime is /ack/. The advantage is that this requires the student to hold less information in working memory and emphasizes the word family part of the word. The onset and rime portion of words can be emphasized by scooping under each part with a marker or pencil as a reminder to the student.

(b) Ask the student to re-read the word as a whole one or two times after decoding. If the student cannot do this, model the reading of the word for him/her and then ask the student to read the whole word. Another step is to ask the student to whisper the sounds as he/she decodes and then say the whole word aloud. The goal is for the student to get in the habit of reading the word as a whole.

Irregular words in the story must also be practiced. These words have to be memorized and students can be helped in this process in a number of ways. See the handout on “Methods of teaching Spelling of Irregular Words”.

2. The word level practice should be short (only a few minute of a reading session) and then move to the level of **reading in phrases or sentences**. Select sentences or phrases from the story or passage and have the student practice reading these fluently. If the student gets stuck on a word and has to decode, use one of the word level strategies above and then ask the student to re-read the phrase or sentence without decoding.

3. **The next step is to read the passage**. If the student is still experiencing difficulty, try these strategies using the passage:

( a ) The adult reads and stops on words that the student has demonstrated the ability to read well and the student fills in the selected words. Obviously, the student must follow along with the reader and attend in order to do this task. Decodable words and irregular words can be targeted but not at the same time. For example, read first and stop on pattern words and then read and stop on irregular words explaining to the student what type of words are being selected.

( b ) The adult and student take turns reading. Turns can be at the sentence, paragraph or page level as the student’s needs dictate. Gradually increase the amount of reading that the student does.

( c ) The student “whisper” reads a sentence or passage and then talks about what has been read to check for comprehension.

4. **Numerous passages that practice the same patterns** may be required before automaticity is achieved. The decodable readers that are aligned with reading programs often need to be supplemented with readers from other sources. A handout is included that lists some of these sources.

5. **Make practice short and rewarding to the student**! Quit before frustration sets in and give rewards for the effort it takes. Practice more often for shorter periods of time if necessary. The more practice, the quicker the improvement. Provide rewards that are meaningful to the student and recognize the hard work that reading is for them.